

A Homage to Sérgio Vieira de Mello

Human Rights Defender/Martyr

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The international Human Rights Defender and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, who, in his own words “liked to get his boots dirty from time to time” in upholding human rights and protecting human dignity laid down his life in a bombing attack in Baghdad last month. He was not in Iraq as a representative of occupying forces. In view of his vast experience and impeccable credentials, he was deputed by the UN Secretary General as a Special Envoy to accelerate the process of developmental activities and effective implementation of Humanitarian Aid Programme. He did try to touch chord with the people of Iraq when in an interview (the last interview) to a Brazilian daily paper, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, he said that “This must be one of the most humiliating periods in history (of Iraq). Who would like to see their country occupied? I would not like to see foreign tanks in Copacabana”. Terrorism is indeed blind towards its victims.

Mr. Sérgio de Mello had come a long way to head the UN Commission for Human Rights. He was a man to be around in the zones of conflict and crisis throughout his career. He was in our neighbourhood in South Asia thirty three years ago, helping Bangladesh to recover from the horrendous wounds of repression unleashed on her by Pakistan army during the struggle for independence. He was in Cyprus, Mozambique, Peru and Lebanon when these countries had faced wars or were in the midst of conflicts. He is well remembered for his diplomatic skills and perseverance during the transition of East Timor towards a democratic and sovereign state. He also played a big role in bringing peace in Kosovo.

Educated in Paris, where Mr. Sérgio de Mello studied Philosophy, he was well known as a student activist. Even in diplomacy and high profile jobs entrusted to him he remained an activist. He had a sharp mind to grasp the problems and was equally gifted with a pragmatic approach to resolve them. Those who have interacted with him know that he disapproved lengthy discourses but had the patience to bear with it. He had a sharp eye to sift wheat from the chaff which enabled him to reach to the core of a problem.

In a strange feat of destiny he is reported to have been alive for several hours when he laid trapped in the rubble of the building which was hit by a truck loaded with explosives. He must have been wondering that having survived volatile zones of wars he had such a little time to restore the dignity of Iraqi people and rebuilding their country.

The death of Sérgio Vieira de Mello is a great loss to humanity and a greater loss to the community of Human Rights Defenders.

A Prayer for Gil Loescher

The bombing attack which killed Mr. Sérgio Vieira de Mello, critically wounded and crippled the noted academic and expert on Migrations and Refugee Studies, Gil Loescher. In fact Gil alongwith his another colleague Arthur Hilton (who died) were holding a meeting with Mr. Sérgio Vieira de Mello when bombing attack took place.

Gil, a reputed Professor of International relations, has written and edited numerous books on refugees, human rights, international relations and international security. His latest work *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* published by OUP is a reference book on refugee regime and international politics.

Gil has lost his both legs and is recovering in a hospital in Germany. We all remember him as a tall, handsome and a vibrant Professor making valuable and meaningful contributions during the IASFM (International Association for the Study of Forced Migration) conferences. He is in a state of shock and we are not sure how long it will take him to recover. His two daughters, Maggie and Claire alongwith their mother are with Gil. They have set up a web page <http://www.caringbridge.org/pa/gilloescher/index.htm> to keep his friends, colleagues and admirers informed about his health. The IASFM through Joanne Van Selm and Wolfgang Bosswick are constantly monitoring the condition of Gil and informing the members of IASFM.

We pray for an early physical, mental and emotional recovery of Gil Loescher.